For Your Information

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The following Op-Ed appeared in the Washington Times on October 4, 2009 **Overlooking Religious Minorities**

By Elizabeth H. Prodromou and Leonard Leo

Anyone taking public transportation in Washington recently has seen the posters of a beautiful Turkish dancer beckoning from Metro buses and from posters in Union Station. The advertisement invites people to attend the Seventh Annual Turkish-American Festival on Sunday. Thousands are likely to accept the invitation and on a fall afternoon, crowd Pennsylvania Avenue to enjoy "Turkish Arts, Crafts, Dance, Food and Fun."

Turkey, like all nations in a tourism campaign, wants to put the best foot forward. However, as demonstrated in an early September desecration of an Orthodox Christian cemetery in Istanbul, religious minorities in Turkey face problems that go often unreported or are ignored.

Because of these concerns, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) undertook a fact finding tour of Turkey in 2006. Religious minorities reported that they continued to experience serious problems regarding opening, maintaining and operating houses of worship, as well as serious restrictions on their ability to train clergy, maintain educational and cultural organizations, and own private and collective property. Communities affected include the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox and Syriac Orthodox Churches, as well as Roman Catholics, Protestants and others.

Anti-Semitism remains an alarming concern, as well. USCIRF also learned of significant restrictions on religious freedom for the majority Sunni Muslim community and the minority Alevis (usually viewed as a unique sect of Islam).

Because these and other religious freedom problems persist, and the existence of several religious communities in Turkey remains imperiled, USCIRF placed Turkey on its "Watch List" in May 2009.

Turkey is approximately 98 percent Muslim, mostly Sunni. About 20 percent of that majority are Alevis, who are subject to unofficial and official discrimination because of their heterodox Islamic faith. The Alevi, who do not worship in mosques, for example, have great difficulty getting official permits to build assembly houses for worship.

The remaining 2 percent of Turkey's population, estimated at 75 million, is comprised of non-Muslim and mainly Christian minorities. The significant restrictions on religious minority communities include state policies and actions that have effectively used religious freedom restrictions to produce the broader political and economic disenfranchisement of religious minorities who, in some cases, are being eliminated from lands that they have inhabited for millennia.

Today, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Greek Orthodox Church, the seat of Eastern

Christianity, is nearly extinct. The U.S. State Department estimates fewer than 3,000 remain and other estimates cut that estimate in half. This experience is shared by other Christian faiths that face similar obstacles to the free practice of their religion.

For more than 50 years, the Turkish government has used convoluted regulations and undemocratic laws to confiscate hundreds of religious minority properties, primarily those belonging to the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Roman Catholic and other communities. The state also has closed seminaries, denying these communities the right to train clergy.

In 1971, the Turkish government nationalized the Greek Orthodox Theological School of Haliki on the island of Heybeli, depriving the Greek Orthodox community of its only educational institution for its leadership in Turkey, and putting the very survival of the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Greek Orthodox community at risk.

Hate crimes are a problem, as nonstate actors have attacked religious minorities or symbols of their existence, with inconsistent government investigations or prosecutions - sometimes nothing is done at all. In addition to the desecration of the Orthodox cemetery referenced earlier, the killing of members of minority religious groups has occurred in recent years: In 2003, terrorists bombed two synagogues; in 2006, a Catholic priest was murdered; in January 2007, prominent human rights activist Hrant Dink was killed; and in April 2007, three members of a Protestant church were tortured to death. The crimes were investigated and prosecuted, but not with the speed necessary to ensure timely justice. The Turkish government has not done enough to combat this discrimination, which is sometimes violent.

USCIRF has urged the U.S. government to encourage Turkish officials to continue to condemn violent hate crimes against members of religious and ethnic communities and to ensure prompt investigation and prosecutions, and to stem growing anti-Semitism in some sectors of the Turkish media.

Turkish courts have also overturned legislative efforts by the current government that would have allowed for greater religious freedoms for Muslim women who wanted to wear a headscarf, or hijab, in public institutions. This forces Turkish women to choose between a higher education or their religious beliefs.

One of the participants in last year's festival is featured in the television advertisement promoting Turkish tourism and this weekend's festival. "From what I've seen here, it would be wonderful to go to Turkey. They have beautiful music and beautiful dancing and wonderful food. I'd really like to go," she said.

It is true that there are many wonderful things to experience in Turkey and at this weekend's festival. But if you go, go with eyes open, knowing there is an untold story about Turkey's rich history and the country's fast-disappearing religious diversity.

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